Radiation and Life

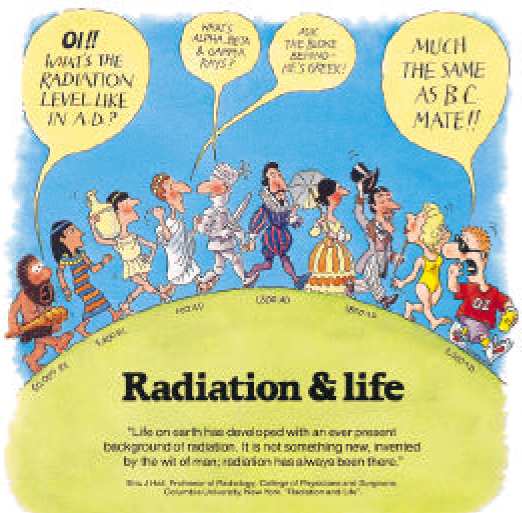
July 2002

Fact Sheet #2

Environmental Health Programs
Office of Radiation Protection

"Life on earth has developed with an ever present background of radiation. It is not something new, invented by the wit of man: radiation has always been there."

Eric J Hall, Professor of Radiology, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, New York, in his book "Radiation and Life".



RADIATION AND LIFE

Radiation is energy traveling through space. Sunshine is one of the most familiar forms of radiation. It delivers light, heat and suntans. We control its effect on us with sunglasses, shade, air conditioners, hats, clothes and sunscreen.

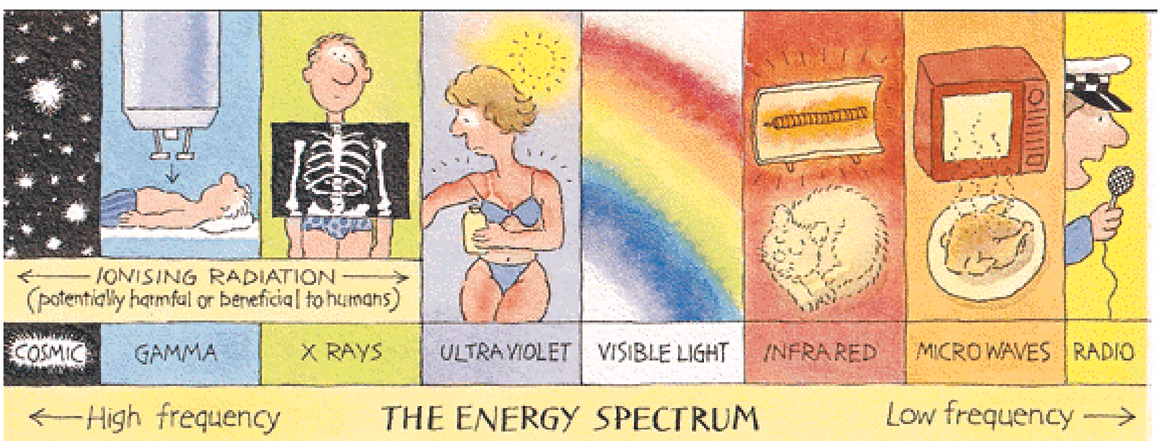
There would be no life on earth without lots of sunlight, but we have increasingly recognized that too much of it on our persons is not a good thing. In fact it may be dangerous, so we control our exposure to it.

Sunshine consists of radiation in a range of wavelengths from long-wave infra-red to shorter wavelength ultraviolet. Beyond ultraviolet are higher energy kinds of radiation which are used in medicine and which we all get in low doses from space, from the air, and from the earth. Collectively we can refer to these kinds of radiation as ionizing radiation. It can cause damage to matter, particularly living tissue. At high levels it is therefore dangerous, so it is necessary to control our exposure.

Living things have evolved in an environment which has significant levels of ionizing radiation. Furthermore, many of us owe our lives and health to such radiation produced artificially. Medical and dental X-rays discern hidden problems. Other radiation is used to diagnose ailments and some people are treated with radiation to cure disease. We all benefit from a multitude of products and services made possible by the careful use of radioactive materials.

Natural background radiation is that which is naturally and inevitably present in our environment. Levels of this can vary greatly. People living in granite areas or on mineralized sands receive more terrestrial radiation than others, while people living or working at high altitudes receive more cosmic radiation. A lot of our natural exposure is due to radon, a gas which seeps from the earth's crust and is present in the air we breathe.

Radiation comes from atoms, the basic building blocks of matter.



THE UNSTABLE ATOM

Most atoms are stable; a carbon-12 atom for example remains a carbon-12 atom forever, and an oxygen-16 atom remains an oxygen-16 atom forever, but certain atoms eventually disintegrate into a totally new atom. These atoms are said to be 'unstable' or 'radioactive'. An unstable atom has excess internal energy, with the result that the nucleus can undergo a spontaneous change to a more stable form. This is called 'radioactive decay'.

Each kind of atom is called an isotope, and unstable ones (which are thus radioactive) are called radioisotopes. Some elements, e.g. uranium, have no stable isotopes.

When an atom of a radioisotope decays, it gives off some of its excess energy as radiation in the form of gamma rays or fast-moving particles. If it decays with alpha or beta emission, it becomes a new element. All the time, the atom is progressing to a stable state where it is no longer radioactive.

Another source of nuclear radioactivity is when one form of a radioisotope changes into another form, or isomer, releasing a gamma ray in the process. The excited form is signified with an "m" beside its atomic number, e.g. technetium-99m (Tc-99m) decays to Tc-99. Gamma rays are often emitted with alpha or beta radiation also, as the nucleus decays to a less excited state.

Apart from the normal measures of mass and volume, the amount of radioactive material is measured in Curies (Ci), a measure which enables us to compare the typical radioactivity of some natural and other materials.

- Picocurie (pCi) = 1/1,000,000,000,000 (one trillionth) of a curie
- Nanocurie (nCi) = 1/1,000,000,000 (one billionth) of a curie
- Microcurie (µCi) = 1/1,000,000 (one millionth) of a curie
- Millicurie (mCi) = 1/1,000 (one thousandth) of a curie

Radioactivity of Some Natural and Other Materials

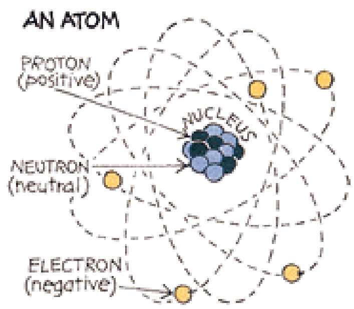
2.2 lbs of coffee	27 nCi
2.2 lbs of granite	27 nCi
2.2 lbs of coal ash	54 nCi
2.2 lbs superphosphate fertilizer	135 nCi
1 adult human	189 nCi
1 household smoke detector	810 nCi
2.2 lbs low level radioactive waste	27 µCi
2.2 lbs uranium	675 µCi
Radioisotope for medical diagnosis	1.89 mCi
1 luminous Exit sign (1970s)	27 Ci
2.2 lbs 50-year old vitrified high-level nuclear waste	270 Ci
Radioisotope source for medical therapy	2700 Ci

IONIZING RADIATION

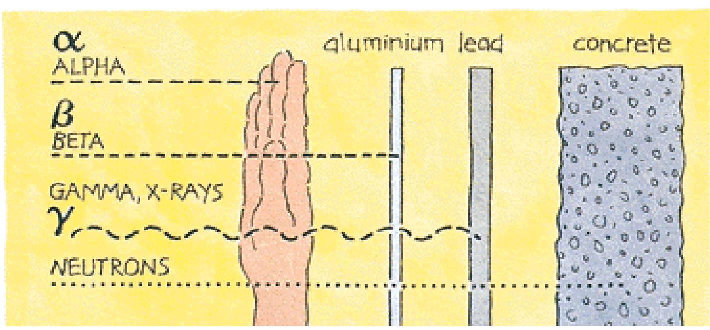
Here we are concerned mainly with ionizing radiation from the atomic nucleus. It occurs in two forms - rays and particles, at the high frequency end of the energy spectrum.

Ionizing radiation produces electrically-charged particles called ions in the materials it strikes. This process is called ionization.

Ionizing radiation has the ability to affect the large chemical molecules of which all living things are made and so cause changes which are biologically important.



There are several types of ionizing radiation:



X-rays and gamma rays, like light, represent energy transmitted in a wave without the movement of material, just as heat and light from a fire or the sun travels through space. X-rays and gamma rays are virtually identical except that X-rays do not come from the atomic nucleus. Unlike light, they both have great penetrating power and can pass through the human body. Thick barriers of concrete, lead or water are used as protection from them.

Alpha particles have a positive electrical charge and are emitted from naturally occurring heavy elements such as uranium and radium, as well as from some man-made elements. Because of their relatively large size, alpha particles collide readily with matter and lose their energy quickly. They therefore have little penetrating power and can be stopped by the first layer of skin or a sheet of paper.

However, if they are taken into the body, for example by breathing or swallowing, alpha particles can affect the body's cells. Inside the body, because they give up their energy over a relatively short distance, alpha particles can inflict more biological damage than other radiations.

Beta particles are fast-moving electrons ejected from the nuclei of atoms. These particles are much smaller than alpha particles and can penetrate up to approximately one half an inch of water or human flesh. Beta particles are emitted from many radioactive elements. They can be stopped by a thin sheet of aluminum foil.

Cosmic radiations consist of a variety of very energetic particles including protons which bombard the earth from outer space. They are more intense at higher altitudes than at sea level where the earth's atmosphere is most dense and gives the greatest protection.

Neutrons are particles which are also very penetrating. On earth, they mostly come from the splitting, or fissioning, of certain atoms inside a nuclear reactor. Water and concrete are the most commonly used shields against neutron radiation from the core of the nuclear reactor.

It is important to understand that ionizing radiation does not cause the body to become radioactive.

MEASURING AND MONITORING IONIZING RADIATION

Rads and Rems

The human senses cannot detect radiation or discern whether a material is radioactive. However, a variety of instruments can detect and measure radiation reliably and accurately. Ionizing radiation is measured in the conventional units of the Rad and Rem, the comparable international units are the Gray (Gy) and Sievert (Sv).

The amount of radiation, or 'dose', received by a person is measured in terms of the energy absorbed in the body tissue, and is expressed in rads. Equal exposure to different types of radiation do not however necessarily produce equal biological effects. One rad of alpha radiation, for example, will have a greater effect than one rad of beta radiation. When we talk about radiation effects, we therefore express the radiation in units called rems. One rem of radiation produces a constant biological effect regardless of the type of radiation.

Smaller quantities are expressed in 'millirems' (mrems, one thousandth) or 'microrems' (µrems, one millionth) of a rem.

The following table gives an indication of the likely effects and implications of a range of radiation doses and dose rates to the whole body:

HOW MUCH IONIZING RADIATION IS DANGEROUS?

A Scale of Radiation Levels

1,000,000 mrem (1000 rem) in a short-term dose would cause immediate illness and subsequent death within a few weeks. Between 200,000 and 1,000,000 mrem in a short-term dose would cause severe radiation sickness with a likelihood that this would be fatal without medical treatment.

100,000 mrem (100 rem) in a short term dose would probably cause (temporary) illness such as nausea and decreased white blood cell count, but not death. Above this, severity of illness increases with dose. As a dose accumulated over some time, 100,000 mrem would probably cause a fatal cancer many years later in 5 of every 100 persons exposed to it (i.e. if the normal incidence of fatal cancer were 25%, this dose would increase it to 30%).

5000 mrem/yr is, conservatively, the lowest dose rate where there is any evidence of cancer being caused. It is also the dose rate which arises from natural background levels in several places. Above this, the probability of cancer occurrence (rather than the severity) increases with dose. Cancer risks associated with this level are not obvious because of the large underlying incidence of cancer caused by other factors.

5000 mrem/yr is the annual equivalent dose limit for radiation workers.

1000 mrem/yr is about the maximum actual dose rate received by any Australian uranium miner.

300-500 mrem/yr is the typical dose rate (above background) received by uranium miners in Australia and Canada.

300 mrem/yr (approx) is the normal background radiation from natural sources in North America, including an average of almost 200 mrem/yr from radon in air.

220 mrem/yr is the average dose equivalent received by a US nuclear power plant worker in a year.

100 mrem/yr is the annual equivalent dose limit for an individual member of the public, exclusive of background radiation and medical administrations.

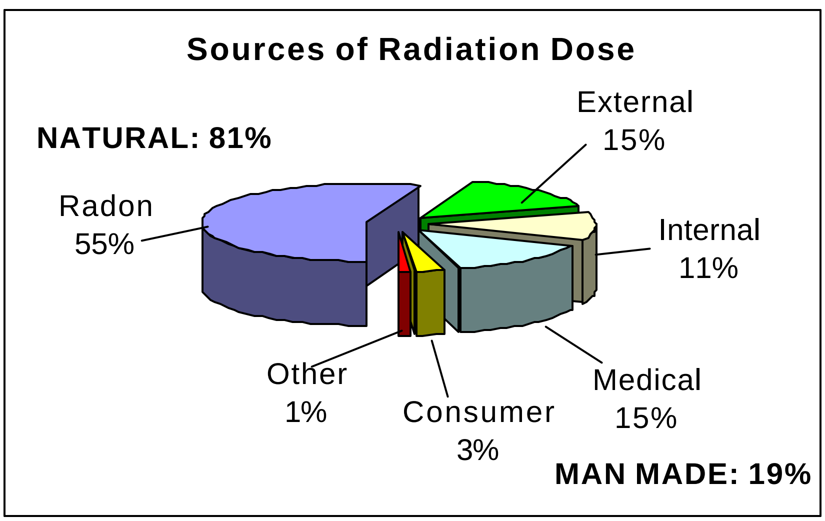
30-70 mrem/yr is a typical range of dose rates from artificial sources of radiation, mostly medical.

For low levels of radiation exposure the biological effects are so small they cannot be detected. Radiation protection standards assume however that the effect is directly proportional to the dose, even at low levels. According to this 'linear' theory of radiation effects, if the dose is halved the effect, or the risk of any effect, is halved. Higher accumulated doses of radiation, while not immediately fatal, may produce a cancer which would only be observed several years after the radiation exposure. The body has defense mechanisms against damage induced by radiation as well as by chemical carcinogens. However, typically the body has to deal only with a relatively tiny amount of damage at any one time, as opposed to having to deal with a very large amount at once, as was the case for the atomic bomb survivors in 1945. Some allowance has been made for this effect in setting occupational risk estimates, but the degree of protection for low-level radiation exposure may well be greater than these estimates cautiously allow.

Tens of thousands of people in each technically advanced country work in environments where they may be exposed to radiation above background levels. Accordingly they wear monitoring 'badges' while at work, and their exposure is carefully monitored.

BACKGROUND RADIATION

Naturally occurring background levels of radiation can typically range from 150 to 350 mrems (mrems) a year and in some places can be much higher. The highest known level of background radiation affecting a substantial population is in Kerala and Madras States in India where some 140,000 people receive an annual dose rate which averages over 1500 mrems per year from gamma, plus a similar amount from radon.



Comparable levels occur in Brazil, Iran and Sudan, with average exposures up to 3800 mrem/yr. Four places are known in India and Europe where natural background radiation gives dose rates of more than 5000 mrem per year. No adverse health effects have been discerned from doses arising from these high natural levels.

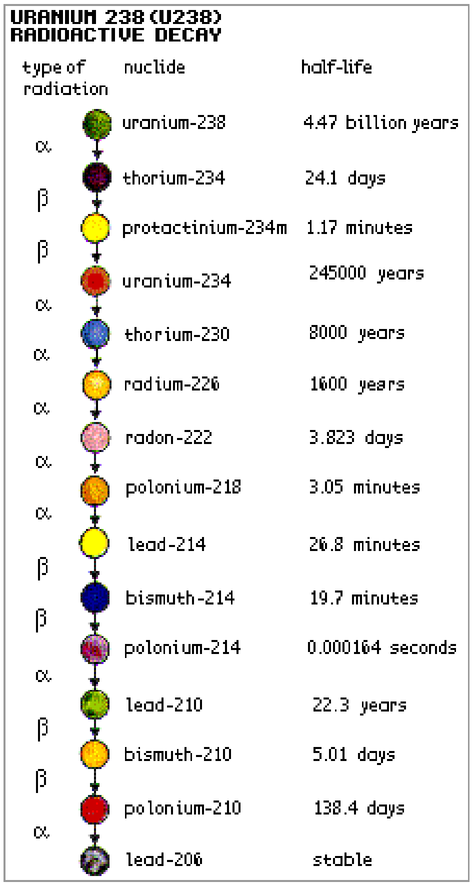
MAN-MADE RADIATION

Ionizing radiation is also generated in a range of medical, commercial and industrial activities. The most familiar and, in national terms, the largest of these sources of exposure is medical X-rays. A typical breakdown between natural background and artificial sources of radiation is shown in the pie chart.

Natural radiation contributes about 81% of the annual dose to the population and medical procedures most of the remaining 19%. Natural and artificial radiations are not different in kind or effect.

RADIOACTIVE DECAY

Atoms in a radioactive substance decay in a random fashion but at a characteristic rate.



URANIUM 238 (U238) RADIOACTIVE DECAY

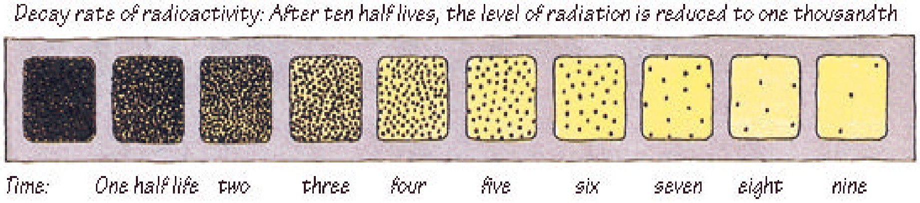
type of radiation	nuclide	half-life
	uranium-238	4.47 billion years
α		
	thorium-234	24.1 days
β		
	protactinium-234m	1.17 minutes
β		
	uranium-234	245000 years
α		
	thorium-230	8000 years
α		
	radium-226	1600 years
α		
	radon-222	3.823 days
α		
	polonium-218	3.05 minutes
α		
	lead-214	26.8 minutes
β		
	bismuth-214	19.7 minutes
β		
	polonium-214	0.000164 seconds
α		
	lead-210	22.3 years
β		
	bismuth-210	5.01 days
β		
	polonium-210	138.4 days
α		
	lead-206	stable

The length of time this takes, the number of steps required and the kinds of radiation released at each step are well known.

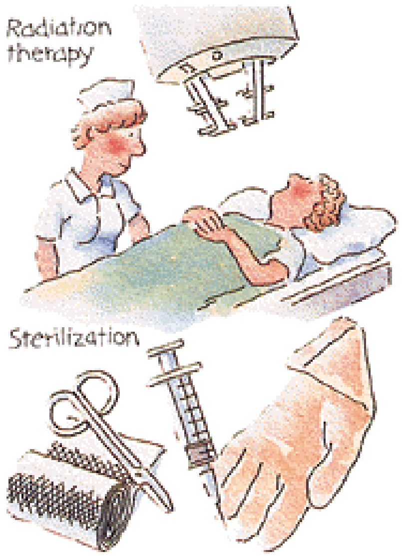
The half-life is the time taken for half of the atoms of a radioactive substance to decay. Half-lives can range from less than a millionth of a second to millions of years depending on the element concerned.

After one half-life the level of radioactivity of a substance is halved, after two half-lives it is reduced to one quarter, after three half-lives to one-eighth and so on.

All uranium atoms are mildly radioactive. The following table for uranium-238 shows the various changes, the type of radiation given off at each step and the 'half-life' of each step that U-238 goes through in its change into stable, non-radioactive lead-206. The shorter-lived each kind of radioisotope, the more radiation it emits per unit mass.



THE HEALTH RISKS OF RADIATION



Many things potentially of great benefit to humanity have associated risks when used. Radiation falls into this category. However, radioactive materials should only be used where the benefits significantly outweigh the risks.

Ionizing radiation is only one of hundreds of things that may cause serious health effects in humans. The degree of damage caused by radiation depends in turn on many factors - dose, dose rate, type of radiation, the part of the body exposed, age and health, for example.

It has been known for many years that large doses of ionizing radiation, very much larger than background levels, can cause a measurable increase in cancers, leukemia ('cancer of the blood'), and genetic mutations (though not in humans) that affect future generations. But what are the chances of developing cancer from low doses of radiation? Any dose of radiation, no matter how small, is assumed to involve a possibility of risk to human health, but at doses below 5000 mrems per year the risks are so small the effects are not measurable and may be negligible.

There is also a delay of many years between a person's exposure to a potential cause of cancer and the appearance of the disease. This makes it difficult to say with any certainty which of many possible agents were the cause of a particular cancer. Cigarette smoking, dietary factors and sunlight are among the most probable causes of cancer. But it is clear that radiation used improperly can increase health risks.

On the other hand, large doses of radiation directed at a tumor are used in radiation therapy to kill cancerous cells, while much larger doses are used to kill harmful bacteria in food, and to sterilize bandages and other medical equipment. Radiation has become a valuable tool in our modern world.

RADIOLOGICAL PROTECTION

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sets protective limits on radioactive emissions for air, water and soil, and develops guidance for cleaning up radioactively contaminated Superfund sites. In turn, other federal and state agencies use EPA's standards to develop their own regulations.

The Washington State Department of Health is the state radiation control agency. The Department's Office of Radiation Protection works to protect the public and the environment from the harmful effects of radiation. By regulating the uses of radiation and measuring radiation levels, exposure is minimized and health is protected. The statutory authority for the Department of Health is found in the Revised Code of Washington under RCW 70.98 (Nuclear Energy and Radiation), and the rules and regulations are found in the Washington Administrative Code under WAC Title 246 (Radiation Protection).

The radiation dose for a member of the public is limited to 100 mrem per year, exclusive of the dose contribution from background radiation or medical administrations. The dose limits for individual members of the public can be found under WAC 246-221-060.

The radiation dose for a radiation worker is limited to 5000 mrem per year. The dose limits for radiation workers can be found under WAC 246-221-010.

Sources

Uranium Information Centre Ltd., http://www.uic.com.au/ral.htm

Links to external resources are provided as a public service and do not imply endorsement by the Washington State Department of Health.